GRATITUDE IN ADVERSITY
Habakkuk 3:16-19
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The closing episode in the television movie, Titanic, left me wishing I could argue with it a bit. It is the morning after the disaster; many of the life boats have been picked up at sea. On a rescue ship a group of survivors is sitting on deck, wrapped in blankets, stunned, eyes glazed with shock, incomprehension. Most are women - most are now widows, their husbands having gone down with the Titanic. Also on deck is a well-meaning woman from New York who has come on the rescue mission for the noblest of motives. She cares deeply and wants to help. But the way she goes about dispensing coffee and dougnnuts and encouragement reveals that she has no comprehension either of the enormity of the tragedy. Mostly, the survivors, huddled in their blankets, ignore her. Finally, she says something like..."Come now, ladies, You must accept it. It was the Good Lord's will." And the woman to whom she is extending hot coffee and platitudes, still staring vacantly, says simply..."No coffee and doughnuts. And no Good Lord either. God died when the Titanic went down."

It is, of course, the oldest and perhaps the most fundamental issue. The well-meaning woman expressed what seems, over the years, to be the majority opinion. God, the Creator, is in control. Whatever happens, He causes to happen. The only responsible thing to do is accept what comes with courage. Her devastated adversary, on the other hand, gives voice to the minority opinion. If God visits this on people He is supposed to love, what kind of God is He, what kind of love are we discussing? Skepticism about religion comes from the intuitive knowledge that a God responsible for evil isn't much of a God. And deep, personal pain results when individuals persist in torturing themselves with the proposition that God is responsible for the particular suffering they are experiencing.

It is the oldest and most fundamental issue. The Bible does not treat it lightly or superficially. In fact, the Bible is very human on this one, very honest and very strong. The text for today is from the book of the Prophet Habakkuk. You can spend a lifetime in church and never hear a sermon from Habakkuk. And that's unfortunate because it is a remarkably candid piece of literature. Written by an Israelite prophet at the time when the power of ancient Babylon was at its height, the book expresses the fear and despair God's people were experiencing as they surveyed their future prospects. Things didn't look good at all.

The prophet presents the ancient dilemma. "Why is there evil and injustice and suffering in the world? Why, particularly, does God's special nation - always seem to be in trouble?"

> "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
> and thou wilt not hear?"

The prophet tries to convince himself that God has raised up the Babylonians to punish Israel for past sins, a favorite prophetic theme. But this prophet is just human enough to have the words stick in his throat..."Lord, how can you stand these evil men? Your eyes are too holy to look at evil...So why are you silent while they destroy people who are more righteous than they...?"

And then, dramatically, in the final one-third of the book, a radical change in direction. Habakkuk does not come down on the side of logical fatalism. He does not lay the blame on God and propose stoic resignation. That's the answer to evil and suffering proposed by nearly all the religions of the world: Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism-Karma Fate, Determinism, "What will be will be", "You must accept the

Good Lord's will." Habakkuk, on the contrary, leans in a distinctly different direction and in a radical new freedom ends his work in a magnificent Psalm -

"Even though the fig trees have no fruit
And no grapes grow on the vine,
Even though the olive crop fails
And the fields produce no grain,
Even though the sheep all die
and the cattle stalls are empty,
I will still be joyful and glad,
Because the Lord my God is my savior."

Sometimes the Bible presents the issue poignantly: "How long, O Lord?" the Psalmists ask. Sometimes it is angry: "Why are the wicked men prosperous? Why do dishonest men succeed?" Jeremiah demanded, and followed up with his own sense of justice. "Lord...you see how I love you...Drag these evil men away like sheep to be butchered." And sometimes it is presented in all its complexity and human ambiguity as in Job.

The contemporary statements of the ancient issue command attention: The Holocaust, and the numbing reality "After Auschwitz"; the philosophical wrestling with a world in which that could happen. Elie Wiesel reflected on Rosh Hashanah in an extermination camp:

"What are you, my God, compared to this afflicted crowd...What does your greatness mean, Lord of the universe, in the face of all this weakness?"

American playwrite Archibald MacLeish framed it memorably in JB, a contemporary retelling of the Old Testament story of Job. Two broken down actors working as circus vendors, fall into the roles of God and Satan...In the prologue one says:

"I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry out who cannot sleep:
If God is God He is not good..."

The story itself begins on Thanksgiving Day, as JB, Sarah and their five healthy, marvelous children, sit down to dinner. The children are irreverent, raucous, full of life and joy. Sarah wants them to be grateful but soon proves to herself that gratitude is very difficult precisely because they have so much. She and JB talk about the fact that things are so good. JB says:

"Never since I learned to tell
My shadow from my shirt, not once,
Not for a watch tick, have I doubted
God was on my side, was good to me.
People called it luck - it wasn't...
It isn't luck." (p.35).

Reinhold Niehbuhr wrote in his journal once that he had difficulty with Thanksgiving because it always bordered on self-congratulation, or at least complimenting God for His wisdom in blessing us. And that is what is hammered out in Habakkuk and in Job and JB,

The final and most important setting for the issue, after all is personal. It is not academic. It is not a philosophic dilemma when evil happens in life - to one's family, friends, nation. The great Christian mystic, Howard Thurman, observed: "Weeds do not have to be cultivated, vegetables do. Those things in life which make for

disintegration seem ever alert, taking advantage of every situation to turn it to their account." (Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 6, p.981). We are personally acquainted with the existential reality of tragedy and suffering: from the time it rained on the day of our first grade picnic and we wondered how a God of mercy could allow such heartless cruelty, to the shock of reading the alumni magazine and discovering that a friend, father of two, loving, happy, successful, is gone, dead. It is our earliest - and latest crisis.

Intellectually it is a question of the relation of God's providence to human freedom: of God's love to human suffering. It is, of course, a question ultimately of God's existence in relationship to a world in which tragedy happens.

What do we believe? What does the faith say?

We do not believe that God causes evil. We do not believe that God plans human suffering. We do not believe He is the orchestrator of famine, flood and plane crash. The woman on the deck of the rescue ship was wrong, that is to say. God did not sink the Titanic.

We do believe that the justice God built into creation allows cause and effect to result in suffering sometimes. If you are irresponsible about what you eat, drink, smoke and swallow, you will get sick and it will be your fault - not God's. If you put enough garbage in the rivers and smog in the atmosphere, the ice caps melt, the water rises and everybody dies - not by God's will but human arrogance and stupidity.

We believe that God's love is revealed, not in the security of twenty-four hour-a-day protection. Nationwide specializes in that. We believe that God's love is expressed in His gift of freedom. We believe that freedom is the hallmark of love. If you ever loved anybody, you know that existentially. To love someone is to will them freedom. To love someone is to grant the opposite of ownership, control. Marriages based on power and control aren't very happy affairs. Relationships based on freedom have the possibility of ecstacy, fulfillment, growth. When parent sends child on an errand, across the street, for the first time, love is moving toward freedom. It would be safer not to expose the child to the risk of crossing the street. In fact, sometimes it seems that love prescribes protecting, insulating, but that always tallies up to control and is not love at all. Love watches freedom grow and sometimes love even has to pull away the secure foundations to allow an individual to be free. And sometimes this love-freedom sequence turns out badly. Because sometimes the child on his first errand falls down and skins a knee. And sometimes the adolescent drives the family car into a wall. And sometimes the right conditions converge and a tornado swoops out of the sky, or the cells, unaccountably, begin to multiply and spread.

It was Paul Tillich who taught that God has given nature its freedom as He has given us our freedom. Freedom means risk. Risk means that accidents will happen. In the context of the whole creation love produces ripe fruit, bushels of grain and also the possibility of a hurricane. George Arthur Buttrick observed that "God in lowly love respects the freedom which he has given." (God, Pain and Evil, p.110).

We believe in the relationship between love and freedom and therefore the possibility of tragedy. Our faith is big enough to include the human response to tragedy when it happend. We are mistaken when we identify despair, grief, anger, with weak faith or no faith. The Bible, unlike modern devotional magazines, is full of those emotions. Christianity can include the anger human beings feel when

someone close dies. We are learning the necessity of owning and expressing anger as part of the grief process. Good doctors know now that people feel numbness, despair, depression and then anger at the death of a loved one. We know now that somewhere in the grief process people are probably going to get angry: with the hospital, the physicians, the nurses for allowing it to happen. And ministers know that a part of that anger, often unexpressed because it shocks us, is reserved for God. Well, it shouldn't shock us. It's not only healthy psychologically to get it out, it is, I suppose, honest theologically. God's love can handle our anger. In fact, it invites it. Our prayers, of course, are polite, civilized, victorian. Our guts may be churning with fear, rage, or hurt, but our prayers sound like very poor junior high school poetry. A friend of mine recommends yelling our prayers when we feel like it. There is plenty of precedent for it. He does it himself, he says. He tells a very funny story about walking up and down the aisle of his church yelling out his feelings of anger to God and suddenly realized that there was a woman sitting in the back pew, quietly meditating. I don't know whether that part is true, but I know that the God who loves us like our own mother and father - who gives us freedom - can handle our deepest feelings. "There is something authentic and dignified about standing one's ground with God," Howard Thurman suggested. (Op.cit., p.986).

The Bible prescribes gratitude for good things. God may not have singled you out for health, well-being, success. I can't believe, frankly, that He did without believing the reverse. But He did create the system in which it can - and does - happen. And He built the impetus toward well-being, and His loving will is for health and peace. If you have them, be grateful for them. Be grateful for them and you will enjoy them even more.

But the acid test, Biblically, comes when the cupboard is bare, sickness interrupts, when death strikes, when goodness slips through your fingers. The acid test, in the Bible, is when all you have is God.

It is then that a new, deeper, more profound faith begins to emerge. That's how Job's story concludes. He never gets answers to his questions about injustice, evil and suffering. What he gets is God - and it is sufficient.

The promise is God's presence - God's grace and power and love. The promise is a love that will not let us go; love from which nothing in life can separate us. Archibald MacLeish, in JB, provided an unforgetable metaphor: Mr. Zuss, the God character, is scolding Nickles who plays Satan:

"Isn't there anything you understand?
It's from the ash heap God is seen
Always! Always from the ashes,
Every saint and martyr knew that."
(p. 50, Scene II).

We who have stood at the foot of a cross have known that at a level too profound for words. We have heard the cry: "My God, why have you forsaken me" and we have known that somehow God was involved in that dying. And so with Pilgrims in Massachusetts: and pilgrims unknown across the centuries let us thank our God for harvest and home, for life and breath and food and drink. Let us be grateful for what we have. But essentially, at the heart of it all, may there be the simplest and purest and most beautiful thanksgiving: a gratitude to God for His love and presence and promise of faithfulness. Or as someone said 2,500 years ago....

"Even though the fig trees have no fruit
And no grapes grow on the vine,
I will still be joyful and glad,
Because the Lord my God is my savior."
Amen.